DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 182 275 SP 015 221

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TITLE PEP and SEP in Hartford. A Community Component in Which the School Does What It Does Best.
INSTITUTION New England Teacher Corps Network, Portsmouth, N.H.
PUB DATE [79]
NOTE 10p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Education: After School Programs: *Extended School Day: *Parent Education: Parent School Relationship: *Parent Teacher Cooperation: *School Community Cooperation: School Role

ABSTRACT

A description is given of a parent education program and a student extended-day program in a multiethnic elementary school. Most of the teachers in the adult program are regular teachers at the school; however, some parents are recruited for teaching courses in areas where they are competent--e.g., a Spanish-speaking parent conducting a course in Spanish conversation to teachers in the school. The extended-day program for the children is largely recreational and tailored to fit in with the hours parents are in class. (JD)

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ED182275

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PEP AND SEP IN HARTFORD

A COMMUNITY COMPONENT IN WHICH THE SCHOOL DOES WHAT IT DOES BEST

BY

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HARTFORD TEACHER CORPS PROJECT

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Hartford Teacher Corps Project

The Hartford Teacher Corps' Parent Education Program (PEP) and its Student Extended-Day Program (SEP) are providing the reasons for parent involvement in the target school. Like most schools with a large number of working mothers, the Martin Luther King, Jr. School rarely fills its auditorium when special programs are presented for parents, and formal meetings of the parent organization usually can be conducted most comfortably in a conference room. Parents will rally for a cause or in response to an acute problem, but when things are relatively serene, invitations to become involved get filed under "good intentions." Unless, that is, there is something more interesting to do than listen, talk, and drink coffee.

King is a huge, new, multi-ethnic elementary school. Last September 1200 K-6 pupils moved across the street from an 1868 structure to this remodeled building which had been a high school for over 50 years. Although architecturally dull on the outside, in comparison to the old building, the inside is inviting, and almost ideally flexible in terms of space utilization. King is 88% Black and almost 12% Hispanic, but the official co ts don't show the third group - Black West Indian children who have a different set of contributions for the enrichment of the school's culture.

But King's need for parental involvement has little to do with its new building, and there are no serious cultural conflicts or any special problems which are different from those of other Title I schools. King teachers acquired their experience in individualized instruction, open classrooms, and team teaching in the old building. What they want from Teacher Corps' school-university partnership is an improvement in the basic skills of their children. They have acknowledged their need for additional know-how in several areas, but their top concern is getting the parents involved in the education of their children.

The Teacher Corps staff suggested that the Martin Luther King School ought to reach out for parents and provide for their needs and interests by doing that which it does best -- namely, teach. School folk, they said, teach better than they entertain, socialize, or conduct meetings. The staff agreed enthusiastically. PEP was established to teach parents, and SEP to teach their older children after school in a way that obscures the line between fun and learning.

PEP does not compete with established adult education programs; and SEP does not compete with established recreation programs (although it cooperates with some, hopefully to their advantage). PEP and SEP are for the parents and children in the King neighborhood. Most of the instructors are King teachers; thus those who teach parents may be teaching their children also. Some of the instructors may be parents, and some of the students in PEP courses are King teachers and paraprofessionals; thus some of those who are teaching teachers may be parents of their pupils.

PEP's goal is to improve the schooling of children by improving the teamwork of teachers and parents. Some of the courses advance that goal directly by teaching parents how to re-enforce schooling in the home and how to improve the quality of informal home learning. Others are intended only to bring more parents into school more frequently for enjoyable and fulfilling experiences, and to build trust and rapport through common interests that are less personal and emotional than their common interests in specific children. A few courses are designed to raise the educational level of some parents (and thus the home learning environment) or the employability level of others. There is no long-range funding in sight for vocational training, a high school diploma program, or college courses for parents. But those who gain skills in PEP will have overcome some inertia, experienced some forgotten intrinsic rewards of learning, and gained some knowledge of other educational programs in the city. And they will have learned of the school's sincere interest in making life better for them and their children.

PEP offers a potpourri of 29 courses selected exclusively for their box office potential. Like other producers, the staff relied on intuition and experience, plus some specific suggestions from teachers, paraprofessionals, and parents. Of the many that are offered, about ten will generate enough interest to fly. That's the needs assessment. A formal instrument would kill it. The appeal is to four categories of needs or interests (see the course descriptions): self-improvement, parenting, leisure activities, and miscellaneous personal interests. Courses vary in length from one or two sessions(Plants) to a full year (G.E.D. preparation, Spanish for Native Speakers). The time of day is of crucial importance to

many. Many Hispanic parents, for instance, are unwilling to leave their homes when the children are there. Thus courses are offered during the school day, after school, and in the evening.

The outreach machine is the student body, each member of which (o) most -- we hope) carried home an attractive brochure in two languages. Additional outreach is provided by those who take the courses. About 100 parents are expected for the first round of courses, but they will recruit friends for subsequent cycles. The calendar is completely flexible, and a new course or repeat can start whenever a reasonable number makes the commitment. Meanwhile the inservice component is building up steam for systematic outreach by teachers for direct parent-teacher teamwork.

There is no brochure for the Student Extended-Day Program. The strategy here is to phase in quietly and gradually to avoid the kinds of disasters which result from poor crowd control or inadequately structured programs. After-school participants are critical. They don't need instructors or leaders for casual recreation. The special qualities of school-sponsored programs ought to be purpose, good planning, and challenge. Teacher Corps' first move was to use its outreach machinery to revive the scouting program. Two Brownie troops and two Junior Girl Scout troops are now underway, and a Boy Scout troop has been established, the first in ten years in the King neighborhood. A dance group and an African Arts program were next. Participants were selected on the basis of demonstrated talent, or potential. African Arts will run in ten-week cycles with changing enrollment, but the 28 members of the dance group (including five boys) have their hopes set on joining the famous "North End Dance

Troupe", for which they will become eligible when they enter the 7-8 middle school across the street. Few vacancies are expected before the sixth grade members graduate.

"Exercises and Games" provides fun with structure and strenuous activity with a multi-cultural theme. The ideas, purposely, are drawn from several coutries and cultures. Soon to be phased in are photography (taught by a King vice-principal), and in cooperation with others, swimming lessons, tennis lessons, and a high-powered science program. Tutoring will begin with 10 King sixth graders and 10 top students from the neighboring 7-8 middle school who are being trained by their reading consultants. The four interns will help supervise the tutors; one is also assisting in African Arts; another is working with the dance group; and two are the chief planners of Exercises and Games.

SEP's purpose is not so easy to define as PEP's. The need for recreational learning experiences after school is really the same as the need for enriched home learning experiences. But SEP also provides additional reasons for parental involvement in the school. The call is out for volunteers, and one of the PEP courses offers to train parents specifically for the scouting program. Moreover, the benefits of after-school learning for children might build a lobby in support of institutionalizing some of the King programs and in support of other programs sponsored by other agencies.

The major costs for SEP and PEP are stipends for the instructors and an extraordinary amount of time and energy for coordination and

management. Most materials can be scrounged or paid for by charging laboratory fees, although it's better to get started by providing everything free. In Hartford it is a major problem to extend building hours beyond the budgetary and energy-conserving limit of 4:00 p.m. However, the school system has authorized such an extension and provided an extra hour of custodial service by staggering shifts. The project pays the overtime for evening service.

The trouble with volunteers is that teaching adults, almost as much as teaching children, is an intensive and exhausting activity on site and requires preparation in addition. A few volunteers wear out before they've finished their courses, and most say, "once is enough". But qualified and motivated instructors are available for about $7.50 per hour. As for management, the Hartford staff may have some practical advice by about next June. Presently all hands are desparately treading water as application forms and calls from prospective students and teachers pour in, each demanding a response with relevant information about time and a location (both of which have to be negotiated).

Can the school system sustain PEP and SEP after Teacher Corps is gone? Not at the same cost, of course; but if the continuing costs were the same as the start-up costs, Teacher Corps would not have been needed. Survival of the programs, or "institutionalization", as the regulations put it, is a matter of degree. How much survives will be the product of will and planning.

If there is no conviction that parents have a role in schooling and that the school has a role in after-school learning, then there is no reason to institutionalize PEP or SEP. Right now the King staff is turned on to the idea that effective parent-teacher teaming is their most important hope for lifting the stubborn ceiling on test scores, and they support the strategy of PEP and SEP. Their support will continue, though, only if the strategy works. It will work only if the inservice component succeeds in developing a parallel strategy for reaching out to the parents who do not participate in PEP or SEP, and in developing a variety of tactics for effective team work with a variety of individuals.

The resources need to be mobilized and then periodically renewed by special funding. After the start-up effort, there should be momentum for the following:

1. Exploiting the resources of the community

   Regular school newsletter should inform parents of learning opportunities in the community, and daily bulletins should inform children of after-school activities in the school neighborhood. The school should provide space for some activities, and it should offer its outreach service to all.

2. Recruiting volunteers for instructional teams

   Taking advantage of new relationships during the first year after the project, Teacher Corps' Steering Committee should be able to organize a handful of courses and student activities by organizing teams of volunteer instructors or leaders, each with a commitment for only a few afternoons.

3. Organizing fee programs

   Potential instructors should be encouraged to organize self-supporting fee courses or activities. A ten-hour course at $7.50 per hour would support itself for a five-dollar fee with a minimum enrollment of 15. Additional fees might be deposited in a PEP scholarship fund.

4. Getting to know all of the home room parents

   This is really the goal. PEP and SEP develop the climate for outreach by individual teachers. The know-how, which the project has the responsibility for developing, is the art of finding the parents, the art of building mutual respect, and the art of contracting with the parents for home activities which are most appropriate for each individual. If 100% of the teachers will participate in the training, they will have a case for regular released time periods to facilitate their parent teaming activities.

5. Continuously seeking new sources of funding for periodic renewal shots

   Until substantial changes are made in Connecticut's school finance system, there is no hope for substantial funding from the city, which is already making heroic efforts to meet escalating costs. Every now and then, however, a short-term grant can provide new energy and new momentum in the form of managerial and clerical services and stipends for instructors.

There is much more to learn from a well-established community school, but the Hartford project acknowledges financial realities. The staff is attempting to do what it can with short-term funding to provide momentum for portions of its Parent Education Program and its Student Extended-Day Program. There is hope for small grants in the future to provide renewal energy, and there is hope for the precious resource of weekly early dismissals for inservice and parent-teacher activities. Long-term success should be measured, however, not by the number of programs or the number of participants in the programs. The goal of the Martin Luther King, Jr. School in Hartford is better schooling through better teaming of teachers and parents. PEP and SEP are part of the strategy -- the part which calls upon King teachers to do for parents that which they do best. Teaching and learning are their fortes. Socializing with parents is a lot more satisfying after working with them in teaching and learning situations.